

L. Anthony Sutin Civic Imagination Award Nomination Letter

Cause

Columbia Heights, MN has long been a city of diversity and acceptance. In 1921 the city's first police department was created. From that historical moment, the City of Columbia Heights worked hard to foster peace and order. At only three-and-a-half square miles, Columbia Heights is a geographically small city that borders Northeast Minneapolis. Albeit small in size, Columbia Heights is home to approximately 20,000 citizens; citizens of varied race, religion, and socioeconomic status, as well as its very own school district, Minnesota Independent School District 13, with a student body that exceeds 3,000. Like many small cities have faced, Columbia Heights was subject to many obstacles over the last several decades, and perhaps no more trying than the recent recession and a rapidly changing population.

In 2000, Columbia Heights was a city of 18,520 residents. Of those residents, 87.4% were White, 3.6% were African American, and 3.2% were Hispanic or Latino. The remaining population was made up of 1.6% Native American, 3.5% Asian, and 1.31% from other races. Ten years later in 2010, Columbia Heights had grown to 19,496 people. The population had changed to 69.7% White, 13.5% African American, and 12% Hispanic, with another 1.5% Native American, 4.8% Asian, and 6.2% from other races. This drastic demographic change came with new challenges, and the city needed someone to step up and address the needs of its changing community.

Approximately 16.3% of Columbia Heights residents live below the poverty level – almost 5% more than the state average and almost 2% more than the national average, meaning Columbia Heights has one of the highest poverty rates in the tri-county metro area. With an inordinate amount of subsidized housing for a city its size; a problem compounded by the mortgage crisis, house values began to decrease significantly as well. As a result many homes went into foreclosure and became vacant, and many owners walked away from their properties and began renting their properties out because they could no longer afford to live there on their own. Today, more than a third of all residential property is rental. A highly transient group was thus borne into the population as a result of these difficult times, difficult times that continue today.

All of these dynamics combined for a community of both great and specific need. As local government aid, or LGA, funding decreased; the Columbia Heights Police Department began to feel the effects of change. A department of twenty-five officers and a tightening budget caused the department to discontinue several programs that had been created specifically to address the needs of the community. Most proactive programs were placed on indefinite hiatus, and the only three officers with dedicated Community Oriented Police Officers' positions were discontinued. Neighborhood Watch and Rental Property Programs were discontinued and patrol tactics once again became reactive. The proactive community programs were no longer a priority.

The school district and the police department did not have an effective relationship during these changes and the school district had their own storms to weather. As funding leveled off in response to the recession, an increasingly diverse population began to fill the classroom. Students who spoke English as a second language made up 10% of state classrooms. However, with a growing Hispanic and East African population, among others, the Columbia Heights School District's average for English Learners was trending into double digits. Lacking the resources to respond to this change, immediately test scores began to drop as the student body grew larger and their needs grew more diverse. By 2012, there were 38 different languages spoken in the classrooms and approximately 30% of all students were now considered English Learners.

With low morale, both officers and educators struggled. Police Officers were failing to find the value in Community Oriented Policing, and instead began refocusing all of their energy onto enforcement tactics, creating a perception of mistrust between officers and the community. Teachers strained to meet the needs of the rapidly changing classroom. As the 21st Century began with problems, both new and old, the Columbia Heights Police Department and School District were ill-equipped to deal with them and as a result the crime rate rose for several years, school attendance dropped, and behavior throughout the community was trending in a negative direction – and it appeared to be continuing that way into 2008 and beyond.

Effect

With the discontinued community programs, the city's police department's positive relationship between the police department and its community struggled. Crime rates reflected this as they rose drastically since 2000. With multiple homicides occurring in that eight year span from 2000 to 2007, the robbery rate more than doubled, and the property crime rate increased almost fifty percent. The outlook for the City of Columbia Heights and its many residents was bleak. The progressive symbiosis between community and police had been fractured and trust in public servants was waning.

At this same time, the school district was feeling the weight of budgetary woes looming over their organization, immediately affecting the students they served. Test scores were down, truancy was up, and suspensions were at some of the highest levels in history. Student achievement was lacking and the district's high school and middle school students needed immediate improvement. In 2006 the high school did not make the adequate yearly progress and they had not met the state proficiency goals in math or reading in 2004, 2006, or 2008. The changing demographics of the student body created roadblocks to both learning and student assimilation. A student body that was seventy percent White in 2002 was less than fifty percent White in 2006. And by 2012 seventy percent of the student body was made up of students of color.

Change

But change was about and in 2007, the Columbia Heights School District appointed a new Superintendent. Kathy Kelly, who had worked in the school district since 1997 had been through the difficult times with the students and the teachers and understood what had to be done. Revitalization and reinvestment into the students and teachers was needed and community stakeholders needed to help, stakeholders such as the Columbia Heights Police Department, for one. Superintendent Kelly understood the effectiveness of synergy and the positive changes that could be impacted by creating a new blueprint for the school district and the community it serves.

Then, in 2008, under the command of the newly-hired Police Chief Scott Nadeau, the policing style of the Columbia Heights Police department began profound and immediate change as well, mirroring the approach of the school district and its positive outlook on the future. A new culture was created and immediately change began to take place. A strategic plan was created and department efforts were reorganized and refocused in order to meet the changing demands of the Columbia Heights community.

A new philosophy was created within the department that implemented and incorporated community partnerships and citizen involvement, addressing the issues of crime and disorder in the city. The most notable of partnerships was that of the police department and the school district. Criminal activity dropped, and continued to drop over the next 6 years. Criminality that continues to drop today, as Columbia Heights celebrates its lowest crime rate in forty years. The relationship with the community and their police once again began to grow, and the investment of community members and stakeholders was restored. Schools started to

improve and students' needs were again being met. Attendance was improving and enrollment again began to increase. Ultimately, it was the police department and the school district working together using communication, innovation, and synergy to make positive advances towards solving the issues affecting public safety and education, as well as greater social issues affecting Columbia Heights.

Implementation

At first change was slow, but results began to show almost immediately in and around the police department. Officers fought the restraints of complacency and efforts began to increase. Chief Nadeau knew that community involvement was necessary for long-term change, and accountability at the officer level was paramount to this progress. The idea of one Community Police Officer was no longer valid, and all officers were tasked with the responsibility of community policing, while also continuing to effect crime on a purposeful level. The department began to seek out grants to help provide funding for the enforcement and programs needed.

By 2014, the Columbia Heights Police Department required all officers to complete a minimum of ten hours each year in community oriented programs. While initially there was some officer resistance, by the end of 2014 every officer had completed the minimum ten hours with majority of the department going well beyond what was required. This resulted in department participation of almost 1,500 hours of strictly community oriented programs. The department also sought and received funding for proactive policing, including overtime and funding for special hot spot initiatives. These methods relied on crime mapping and statistical analysis to address locations and persons involved in abnormally high criminal activity.

The police department also started to partner with the school district and launched a youth outreach program via a county grant. The Cops-N-Kids program was created and officers began hosting weekly open gym events at both the middle school and the high school, wherein officers would both provide a safe haven for youth to gather and engage in recreational activities, such as basketball, as well as create a dialogue and relationship with the diverse youth of Columbia Heights.

As change continued, so too did the student body. Approximately 36% of students were now African American, with 29% being White, and 24% being Hispanic. 80% of all students in the district received free-or-reduced lunch, which is significantly higher than the state average and places amongst the highest in all of the state of Minnesota. The high poverty rates were directly affecting our community and the school district and police department were coming together to address their needs. The police department and school district increased the school resource program and a third full-time SRO was placed in the Alternative Learning Center for at-risk youth.

Successes

In 2015, the Columbia Heights police department had fully integrated community oriented policing into the DNA of their department. Community Oriented Policing became one of five strategies clearly outlined in the Strategic Plan, constantly seeking ways to improve upon the department's positive impact. In 2009, with the assistance of a federal grant, the Columbia Heights police department was able to implement a full-time sworn position of Community Oriented Policing coordinator. This position became so vital to the organization that after the grant expired, the Columbia Heights City Council approved to fold the position into the budget and continue its operation based on its own merits. This position works closely with the community to ensure safe housing, successful neighborhood and business watch programs and by working with the school district to establish and maintain positive youth outreach. As of 2015, the Columbia Heights Police Department has over

140 neighborhood block leaders and over 75 business partners. Both record highs for the organization – and they continue to grow every single year.

In 2013, the Columbia Heights Police Department was given the Columbia Heights School District’s “Superintendent’s Above and Beyond Award”. This was to celebrate over 5,000 positive youth contacts the police department had with the students. This was accomplished by the police department’s hosting weekly open gyms through the “Cops-N-Kids” program, as well as becoming an active member of the Big Brother Big Sisters program. 14 employees of the police department became active “bigs” meeting with their “littles” every week inside of Columbia Heights’ schools. The bug of community involvement eventually spread throughout the city, as the number of active BBBS participants in the city now exceeds 20 and continues to grow. The police department created the “Teen Academy”, hosting an annual and free after-school program, allowing students meet over the course of several weeks and learn in a classroom setting, as well as hands-on activities, what the job of police officer entails and further create positive bonds between police and the youth.

The Columbia Heights Police Department has also partnered with all elementary schools in the city to promote anti-bullying by reading to kindergarten, first and second grade classes each semester, reaching 655 students in 2014 alone. Along with the department’s annual D.A.R.E. program, youth contacts have increased exponentially over the last 8 years. And the results have been nothing short of amazing. In 2007 and 2008, youth arrests reached record highs with an average of 247 youth arrests each year. Once these youth programs were implemented and positive youth contacts began to increase, youth arrests immediately started to go down, reaching an all-time low in 2014 with 106 youth arrests. The Police Department was awarded the first ever City of Peace award in Columbia Heights in 2015, recognized for their efforts in promoting peace through communication, partnerships, and dedication within the changing community they serve so diligently.

In the summer of 2014, the school district once again partnered with the police department and a community picnic was brought to one of our most diverse and underprivileged neighborhoods. The first annual “Eat and Greet” was held and, along with the school district, the police department partnered with the school district and other city and county agencies to provide free food and education on what’s available to our citizens in order to help them create a home in Columbia Heights. This event provided the opportunity for an open dialogue between the community and their police department, free of the restraints of common law enforcement interactions. This event had almost 100 attendees from the community and was such a big success, 2015’s “Eat and Greet” is being eagerly awaited by the entire community.

2014 marked the most attended National Night Out, where there were 53 gatherings in the community of which all 1,264 attendees were visited by a police officer. The Columbia Heights Police Department hosted monthly “Coffee with a Cop” events at several locations, allowing the community a chance to sit down and speak with police officers informally, allowing the community to get to know their police, as well as allowing the police to get to know their community. This includes “Pizza with a Cop”, which will bring cops into the school lunches to sit and talk with students in a positive setting. The Columbia Heights Police Department hosted the 2014 “Clean, Fed, and Warm” open house at the police department and welcomed our community to come and tour the department facilities, interact with police, and get hands-on training with police equipment, including a use of force simulator, allowing our citizens to understand when, how, and why police use force. With support of several local agencies, including the school district, this venture raised over \$3,500 to purchase food and clothing for the less fortunate.

The year 2014 marked the department’s largest participation in the annual “Shop with a Cop” program, with eight families going shopping with police officers and being provided with Christmas gifts and toys, all of

which was paid for with almost \$4,000 in community donations. Columbia Heights has also begun the Heart Safe Initiative, led by the police department, which is working towards training at least 10% of the entire population in CPR and AED use before the end of the year. This is accomplished by provided monthly first aid trainings hosted by the police department and free of cost to the public, along with the school district ensuring all students are also trained in CPR and AED before they are able to graduate from High School. The Heart Safe Initiative has already partnered with local businesses, churches, and the school district to promote and host these trainings.

The school district has seen immense and positive changes within their buildings as well. Truancy issues have declined and test scores continue to improve. Attendance is also up and K-12 suspensions are down a remarkable 130%. Enrollment in the K-8 schools has increased while high school enrollment has stayed consistent over the last several years. In 2013, 47% of all kindergarten students were considered English Learners and in 2015 25% of all students spoke Spanish as their primary language, while another 6% spoke Somali. Yet Columbia Heights schools continue to thrive despite all obstacles. Superintendent Kelly designed and implemented all-day kindergarten for Columbia Heights and was the recipient of the 2012 VH1 “Save the Music Foundation” Superintendent of the Year, as well as the 2013 Minnesota Supervision and Administration Division Art Educator of the Year for her appreciation and integration of both music and the arts into the classroom.

Valley View Elementary in Columbia Heights is a 2015 finalist for the Minnesota National Distinguished Principal award, after being nominated by Superintendent Kathy Kelly for outstanding leadership and achievement. Valley View Elementary School was selected as a 2012 Minnesota Department of Education “Celebration School”, and in 2013 and 2014 it was recognized as a “Beating the Odds” school by the Minneapolis Star Tribune as the only Minnesota public school with high levels of poverty noted for its significant gains in both math and reading. Also in 2014, the Minnesota Business Partnership awarded Valley View with the Minnesota’s Future Award for exceeding statewide averages in reading and math while serving high percentages of low-income and non-white students. The Police Department has now partnered with Valley View Elementary and the Sheridan Story as well, supporting children of families in need by volunteering to distribute weekly bags of food to those who truly need the support of their community at no cost to the families.

Conclusion

Recently, the Columbia Heights Police Department conducted a citywide survey, asking the community to evaluate their police department. Ultimately, 89% found that the police department has a good relationship with the community and almost 70% found that the police department has been responsive to the changing demographics in Columbia Heights. Perhaps most importantly, 94% of the community found their police department to behave respectfully and professionally and 94% felt safe from crime. After a decade of trials and tribulations, the community of Columbia Heights now has a police department that cares about their needs. The Columbia Heights school district has the largest English-learners student population in the metro area, as parents from all over insist on bringing their children into a community that understands their plight and respects their differences. Nationally there continues to be heated interaction between minorities and their community. However, in Columbia Heights Kathy Kelly and Scott Nadeau took action before reaching critical mass. The school district and police department became a team to overcome great odds, building a community of hope and accomplishment. Behind the leadership of Superintendent Kelly and Police Chief Nadeau, the status quo was no longer accepted. With all prospects set on the future, the police department and school district share the wheel, steering their community towards progress, peace, and community partnerships.